

**PSC 2218W: Legislative Politics**  
**Professor Sarah Binder**  
**Spring 2016**

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**Class: MW 9:35-10:50 am, MPA 305**

**Office hours: M 11 am-12:30 pm, or by appt.**

**Writing TA: Aparna Ravni**

**Office: 427 Monroe**

**Office hours: by appointment**

**COURSE DESCRIPTION and LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

As registered by Gallup in recent opinion polls, only thirteen percent of Americans approve of the performance of the U.S. Congress. Critics call recent Congresses dysfunctional: disagreements between polarized parties in the fall of 2013 shut down the government and brought the country to the brink of default on the nation's debt. Although Congress was remarkably productive at the end of 2015, most observers expect Congress to do very little in the run up to the contest for the White House in 2016. Why are the parties so polarized, and why has lawmaking proved so difficult in recent years? In this course, we will explore and analyze the electoral and institutional forces that shape the membership of Congress and the institution's capacity to solve public problems.

The electoral context sets the stage for our study of Congress—the oldest popularly elected legislature in the world and the most powerful one. After completing this writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) course, you should be able to:

1. Recall and explain electoral, institutional, and systemic features of the U.S. Congress.
2. Accurately apply political science concepts (e.g. power, representation) that relate to Congress.
3. Describe, explain, and apply the three basic theories of legislative organization that are commonly applied to the U.S. Congress.
4. Demonstrate the ability to think critically about the U.S. Congress, as evidenced by performance on exams and writing assignments.
5. Demonstrate conventions of writing in the discipline of political science.
6. Apply critical analytical thinking to your writing through drafting and revising, as well as through peer review of your classmates' writing.

Theories of politics and political behavior can help us to interpret and explain contemporary politics, so throughout the course we will keep a collective eye on events in Washington and elsewhere related to legislative politics and Congress. We will start each class session with a discussion of relevant news to our study of Congress, so I expect students to come to class prepared to raise interesting stories or questions from the week's news. I highly recommend that you read a daily newspaper (e.g. *Washington Post* or *New York Times*) or that you listen to a news program (such as NPR's *Morning Edition* or *All Things Considered*) or that you at least try to consume news by watching *The Daily Show* or reading BuzzFeed). Although attention to developments on the Hill will enhance the value of this course for you, it is no substitute for careful reading and classroom discussion and attendance.

## **REQUIRED READINGS/TEXTS**

The required reading consists of two books and numerous readings posted on Blackboard. Both books are available (in paperback) for purchase in the GW Bookstore.

On occasion, I will post additional readings on Blackboard, or I will circulate them by email. These reading assignments will be announced in class or by email. You are responsible for making sure that I have a working email address for you at the beginning of the semester, and you are responsible for these readings on course exams.

1. Davidson, Oleszek, Lee, and Schickler, *Congress and Its Members*, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, CQ Press.
2. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Yale University Press. 2004.

## **GRADED ASSIGNMENTS and CLASS POLICIES**

Your grade in this course will be based on the assignments listed below. To achieve a passing grade in the course, you must complete and hand in each of the assignments. It is not possible to submit extra assignments to raise one's grade. You are responsible for keeping a hard copy back-up of any written assignments. Political science majors must receive a grade of C- or better in order to count the course towards their required credit hours in the major. For writing assignments, I will subtract one point each day for any missed deadline (unless you discuss a new deadline with me before the due date).

Note: I do not take attendance in class. However, there will be 5 very short "pop" writing assignments at the start of class throughout the semester, worth one point each. Also, students who attend class regularly (and do the reading) will get more out of the course and will have a better chance of doing well on the assignments. So, come to class!

### *Assignments:*

- 20% Midterm exam
- 30% Final exam
- 5% "Pop" writing assignments (5 per semester)
- 45% Research paper

Your research paper grade will be determined as follows:

- 5% Proposal
- 10% Rough draft
- 5% Participation in peer review of rough draft
- 25% Final draft

I will distribute the paper assignment during the first or second week of class. I will distribute a study guide one week before each exam. The exams will include material covered in the assigned readings and in the lectures. Since the lecture material will not necessarily appear in the readings,

missing class will put you at a disadvantage. And since I do not discuss all of the readings in class, skipping reading assignments will also put you at a disadvantage.

## **IMPORTANT DATES**

Exams and papers are *tentatively* scheduled as follows. All written assignments are due in class. Any changes will be announced in class. You are responsible for being aware of any changes.

Paper proposal: Monday, February 1, 2016  
Midterm exam: Wednesday, February 24, 2016  
Rough draft due: Monday, March 28, 2016  
Peer review workshop: Wednesday, April 20, 2016  
Paper due: Wednesday, April 27  
Final exam: TBA when the Registrar posts the final exam schedule

Note: In accord with university policy, the final exam will be given on the designated final exam day/time for this course and not during the last week of the semester.

## **ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

I personally support the GW Code of Academic Integrity. It states: “Academic dishonesty is defined as cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” For the remainder of the code, see: <http://www.gwu.edu/~ntegrity/code.html>.

## **SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

Disability Support Services (DSS): Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential of a disability should contact the Disability Support Services office at (202) 994-8250 in Rome Hall, Suite 102, to establish eligibility and to coordinate reasonable accommodations. For additional information please refer to: <http://gwired.gwu.edu/dss/>

University Counseling Center (UCC): The UCC offers 24/7 assistance and referral to address students’ personal, social, career, and study skills problems. Services for students include: crisis and emergency mental health consultations and confidential assessment, counseling services, and referrals. See <http://gwired.gwu.edu/counsel/CounselingServices/AcademicSupportServices>. Or call (202) 994-5300.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

The course schedule outlines the topics we will cover in class and the reading assignments for each topic. I will at times get ahead or behind the printed schedule. Thus, you may want to adjust your reading pace accordingly. I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus as the semester progresses. You are responsible for any changes to the assigned readings. All of the readings on the syllabus (except for the required books) are available on-line via Blackboard (<http://blackboard.gwu.edu>). Once logged onto the course on Blackboard, follow the links to

“Syllabus,” and you will see separate links for each of the readings. If you have any trouble accessing the on-line pieces, please let me know as soon as possible.

## **January 11**

### **Introduction**

Davidson et al, Chapter 1

Dodd and Oppenheimer, “The House in a Time of Crisis,” *Congress Reconsidered* 2013

Packer, [The Empty Chamber: Just How Broken is the Senate?](#) *New Yorker*, August 9, 2010

Warren, [“Help, We’re in a Living Hell and Don’t Know How to Get Out,”](#) *Esquire* Oct 15, 2014

Binder, [“These four reasons explain why bipartisanship is breaking out all over. Will it last?”](#) *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2015.

Lizza, “A House Divided,” *New Yorker*, December 14, 2015

Texas A&M Writing Center, [“Clear and Concise Writing.”](#) This is a great handout on easy ways to improve your writing.

## **January 13, 20 (no class Jan. 18)**

### **Congress and the Constitution**

Davidson et al, Chapter 2 (pp 15-27)

Toobin, [“Our Broken Constitution,”](#) *The New Yorker*, Dec. 9, 2013

## **January 25, 27**

### **Origins and development of Congress**

*Light reading this week so that you can work on your paper proposal.*

Davidson et al, Chapter 2 (pp 28-39)

## **February 1, 3, 8**

### **Congressional elections (1)**

*Paper proposal due in class on February 1*

Davidson et al, Chapter 3

Toobin, [“Drawing the Line,”](#) *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2006

McCarty, “The Limits of Electoral and Legislative Reform...” *CA Law Review* 2011

Cohn, [“Quit Blaming Gerrymandering for the Shutdown,”](#) *New Republic*, Oct. 3, 2013

Abramowitz et. al., “Don’t Blame Redistricting for Uncompetitive Elections,” *PS* (2006)

Toobin, [“Do we still need the Voting Rights Act?”](#) *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2012

Toobin, “Holder v. Roberts,” *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2014

**February 10, 17, 22 (no class Feb. 15)**  
**Congressional elections (2)**

Davidson et al, Chapter 4

Jacobson, [“Partisanship, Money, and Competition,”](#) *Congress Reconsidered* 2013

Jacobson, “Obama and the Nationalized Electoral Politics in the 2014 Midterm,” *PSQ* 2015

McGhee, Nyhan, and Sides, [“Midterm Postmortem.”](#) *The Boston Review*, Nov 2010

Ansolabehere, Steven, [“Unsafe Seats.”](#) *The Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2011

Arbour, Brian, “All Politics is Local? Not anymore,” [The Monkey Cage](#), Dec. 9, 2014

Enten & Mehta, [“The Election Map Alone Doesn’t Explain the 2014 Republican Wave,”](#) 538

**February 24**

*Midterm exam in class (slight chance it gets pushed back to February 29<sup>th</sup>)*

**February 29**

Film: [“Can Mr. Smith Get to Washington Anymore?”](#)

*After* watching film, read [Department of Justice Press Release](#) and [“Disgraced ex-senator…”](#)

**March 2**

**Representation: The electoral connection**

Davidson et al, Chapters 5 and 16

Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Part 1

**March 7, 9, 21**

**Congressional committees**

Davidson et al, Chapter 7

Mayhew, *Congress*, Part 2

Aldrich, Perry, and Rohde, “Richard Fenno’s Theory of Congressional Committees and the Partisan Polarization of the House,” *Congress Reconsidered* (2013)

**March 23**

**Politics of deadlock and dealmaking**

Binder, *Polarized We Govern*, Brookings Institution 2014

Binder and Lee, [“Making Deals in Congress,”](#) APSA Task Force (2013)

Lizza, [“Getting to Maybe,”](#) *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013

**March 28, 30, April 4**  
**Leaders and parties in Congress**

*Rough draft due March 28*

Davidson et al, Chapter 6

Koger, "Filibustering and Parties in the Modern Senate," *Congress Reconsidered* (2013)

Draper, "[How Kevin McCarthy Wrangles the Tea Party in Washington](#)" *NYT*, July 13, 2011

**April 6, 11, 13, 18**  
**"Unorthodox lawmaking"**

Davidson et al, Chapters 8-9

Taibbi, "[Four Amendments & a Funeral](#)," *Rolling Stone*, August 10, 2005

Smith, "[The Senate Syndrome](#)" *Issues in Governance Studies*, Brookings Institution June 2010

Start reading for April 25-27

**April 20**  
**Peer review workshop on research drafts**

**April 25, 27 (designated Monday)**  
**Making public policy: Congress, the president, and the courts**

Davidson, Chapters 10-12, 14-15

Binder and Maltzman, "Advice and Consent," *Congress Reconsidered* (2013)

Howell and Pevehouse, "When Congress Stops Wars," *Foreign Affairs* 2007

Klein, "[The Unpersuaded](#)" *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012

Steinhauer, "[A Congress That Doesn't Want to Weigh In on War](#)," *NYT*, Dec. 9, 2015